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ABSTRACT

High school (N=116), community college (N=88), and state university (N=105) students residing in San Bernardino, California, responded to a 20-item, 5-point Likert-type questionnaire regarding social, sexual, career, and educational attitudes toward persons with disabilities. Students also identified their perception of the term "handicapped" and identified which disability they would most dislike having, which was mental retardation. Results demonstrated positive attitudes toward disabled persons. The four most positive attitudes were expressed in items which dealt with having a disabled person as a friend, willingness to sit by a disabled person on a plane, voting for a handicapped person for senator, and believing that a handicapped person could be a good teacher. Students strongly disagreed with statements asserting that handicapped people should not be allowed to marry, have little interest in sexual matters, do not need sex education classes, and are not qualified for most employment. Persons with higher educational levels tended to have more positive attitudes about disabled people. These results can be put to use by rehabilitation counselors who can educate nondisabled persons about the actual abilities, particularly in the workplace, of disabled individuals. (CB)

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Student Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons

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Abstract

A study was conducted that researched student attitudes toward the disabled. A total of 309 students participated in this community survey, which evaluated social, sexual, career and educational attitudes toward disabled persons. A 20 item, 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was developed and administered. Results demonstrated positive attitudes toward disabled persons. Attitudes expressed by this student survey were specifically positive toward mainstreaming, friendship with disabled persons, and seeing the disabled in professional career career roles and elected positions. These positive attitudes of high school, community college and state university students reflect a climate where the rehabilitation counselor can make an impact.

Student Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons

The attitudes of a community influence the role and quality of life that disabled people will have in that community. There are various groups of people who compose a community, among them: teachers, parents, city workers, students, and technicians. The various attitudes and perceptions of all the groups within a community have an impact on the rehabilitation and life of disabled persons. The attitudes of the community toward disabled people also have an influence on the quality of services provided by rehabilitation counselors. There has been little research on how different stratas within a communityview disabled persons. The authors were interested in investigating whether there are differences in how persons from different age and educational levels perceive disabled people on social, sexual, career, and educational factors.

In more recent socities and communities, disabled persons have been pitied, cared for, and finally gradually accepted, educated and often employed with the same rights as those who are not handicapped (Buscaglia, 1975; Hewett & Forness, 1976). The quality of life for disabled individuals in a given community is influenced by various factors: existence of voluntary service organizations, public transportation providing busses with lifts, local government enforcement of existing protective legislation, and mainstreaming disabled youth in the public schools. Just as one's position within the community makes a difference in the consequences of a disability, numerous aspects of the community itself influence disability-related experience. Perhaps most basic are the community's size and location (Vash, 1981).

A number of researchers who have been concerned with reactions toward physical or mental stigmas (e.g. physically disabled or mentally ill) have suggested that people generally hold ambivalent attitudes toward stigmatized persons (Katz, 1979; Katz & Glass, 1979; Glass & Cohen 1973). Negative stereotypes of disabled students are not limited to nonhandicapped students. As reported by Parish, Eads, Reece, and Piscitello (1977), college students who were special education and education majors also demonstrated very negative attitudes (i.e. stereotypes) toward various groups of disabled students. Weinberg and Williams, in a 1976 survey, speculated about why the nondisabled think that the disabled have a tragic existence, while the disabled have a very different view of the situation. From a naive perspective, physical disability appears to be one of the worst things that can happen to a person. Disabled people are seen as less happy, less cheerful, and less popular than able-bodied persons (Weinberg, 1976).

Recent research trends in affecting attitudes of students toward disabled people employ the use of media intervention. Rizzi (1984) found that the use of carefully selected films resulted in favorable change of attitudes toward disabled persons. Similarly, Byrd and Elliott (1984) found that educational films facilitated significantly altered attitudes toward the disabled.

Method

To ascertain how a suburban community, San Bernardino, California, views disabled persons, three subgroups of the community were sampled. During the spring school term of 1985 a total of 309 randomly selected subjects participated in this study: 116 high school students, 88 community college students, and

105 university students. The authors developed a 20 item 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, which was piloted with university students and then distributed to a random sample of classes. Social, sexual, career, and educational attitudes were the key factors of focus. Upon completion of the questionnaire, students were asked to identify their perceptions of the term "Handicapped" and to identify which disability they would prefer not to have.

Data analysis included discriptive statistics and an analysis of variance. The researchers were interested in surveying how the Likert scale reflected positive, negative, and neutral attitudes. In order to obtain a true picture of student attitudes the Likert scale questionnaire was designed in such a way that individuals could not express positive or negative attitudes by simply marking all the left or all the right column. Response columns were labled: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. To respond, subjects needed to read carefully because some items were worded in a straight forward format(i.e. "I would choose a handicapped person as a friend."); while others were worded in a reverse or negative format (i.e. "Handicapped people have little interest in sport type recreational activities." or "I would not feel comfortable babysitting for a handicapped child.").

Results

Subjects were presented with an alphabetized list of possible definitions for the term "Handicapped". In order of preference, the following are the results of the students' choice of definition: being in a wheel chair (67%), retarded (12%), paralyzed (9%), blind (2%), and deaf (1%). [9% were undecided.]

Students were also asked to identify the "Handicap they would least like to have". Responses indicate that students would least like to be retarded (42%). Other responses include: paralyzed (29%), blind (17%), and deaf and wheel chair (both 3%). These results differ from those of Weinberg (1976) who found physical disability to be the most unpopular amont the ablebodied.

Mean scores of the 20 items of the Likert scale reflected positive, negative and neutral attitudes. The four most positive attitudes identified were: "Selecting a handicapped person as a friend" ($\bar{X}$=4.05), "Willingness to sit by a handicapped person on a plane" ($\bar{X}$=3.99), "to vote for a handicapped person for senator" ($\bar{X}$=3.86), and "a handicapped person would be a good teacher" ($\bar{X}$=3.7). Strongest disagreement ($\bar{X}$=1.4) was in response to "Handicapped people should not be allowed to marry." Other negative responses include: "Handicapped people have little interest in sexual matters" ($\bar{X}$=1.81), "Sex education classes are unnecessary for handicapped students" ($\bar{X}$=1.65), and "handicapped are not qualified for most employment" ($\bar{X}$=2.09).Educationally there was disagreement: "handicapped students usually do poorly in school" (X=1.74) and "handicapped students should be in special schools" (X=1.69). Neutral findings were indicated in social-sexual attitudes: dating and childcare, as well as career preparation and job placement.

The mean of the population reflects that students have positive attitudes toward disabled people. In those instances where significant differences were found within the population, the difference can be attributed to educational level, that is, persons with higher educational levels tend to be more positive toward disabled persons. (See Table I)

Findings indicate positive attitudes in the following specific areas: having disabled persons as friends, seeing disabled persons in professional career roles, and electing the disabled to public office. Positive attitudes were found toward mainstreaming disabled persons in school and community. While students demonstrated a positive attitude toward disabled persons holding professional and elected positions; there was neutral response ($\bar{X}$=3.0) on evaluation of how well disabled persons are prepared to find jobs. Students indicate a realistic attitude about job placement of the disabled by a positive response to the item "Employers prefer not to hire the handicapped." Those questions dealing with social-sexual perceptions of the disabled, such as dating, babysitting for a disabled child, and adopting a disabled child received neutral results.

Conclusions

If the student population in a community may be a predictor of the future of that community, one must conclude that the future of disabled persons in this community is quite positive. Disabled persons are seen in positive career roles, as potential friends and associates. Areas where students reflect neutrality are well within the realm of the rehabilitation counselor. Such areas where a rehabilitation counselor could make an impact include preparation of disabled persons to find employment. Also to reverse the trend of employers preferring not to hire disabled persons, it appears that there is need for rehabilitation counselors to assume a functional role in the community. This may be achieved by rehabilitation counselors informing potential employers of the skills and training of disabled individuals. The

positive attitude that able bodied students have toward disabled people reflects a positive climate in which rehabilitation counselors can develop job opportunities for disabled persons within the community. To this end, rehabilitation counselors should work with community leaders to build a better quality of life for disabled persons.

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Table I

Analysis of Attitude Toward Friendship with the Disabled by Educational Level

Educational Level	Mean
High School	3.81
Community College	3.97
State University	4.37

F = 11.8903*

* Level of significance = .0001